2: Henry E-5 (1932-1934) 1941
SM3 Caingang SM3
Aweikoma

I

The Forest and Its People

The Kaingáng were forest nomads. For perhaps three hundred years that was the only life they knew, and they resented it. The forest was not their original home, for they were driven into it from their farms on the savannahs to the west by their enemies. They speak with nostalgia of the time long ago when they lived in little fenced villages and planted corn, beans and pumpkins. Before the pacification they had no villages and instead of dividing their time between cultivating their crops and hunting in the forest as they used to do, they wandered forever in the forest and planted no crops at all.

The forests of Santa Catarina are vast and mighty; they are rich and well watered, tall and gloomy. Saplings and trees six feet in diameter crowd close upon one another. Bushes cluster about the trees, and the whole is woven into one solid mass by the vines that hang from trees, twine about bushes, and creep along the ground. The forest everywhere grows right down to the edges of the rivers and looms on both sides like the walls of a great corridor, silent and lovely, impenetrable except with knife or club. Flocks of geese, taboo to the Indians, for those landlocked creatures may not touch these timid and agile waterfowl, skim above the surface of the rivers, and wherever a lichen-covered cliff rises from the river's edge it throws their calls echoing back and forth across the water.

I used to joke with the Brazilians telling them that their beautiful state of Santa Catarina was not a land but a solution, for it is indeed a country of ten thousand water courses. Innumerable little streams undermine the earth, and during the rainy season in August and September, when it sometimes rains for a month without cease, when day after day thunder rolls about the mountain tops and the wind blows and the forest rocks until you

2: Henry E-5 (1932-1934) 1941
SM3 Caingang SM3
Aweikoma

imagine it is going to crash solidly on your head, these subterranean streams cast great sections of the earth into the rivers. Then streams that were sluggish and clear become turgid and rushing. Rivers that moved slowly and whose bottoms you could easily see through their few feet of clear water rise almost four feet overnight, and their purling shallows become dangerous rapids, pouring tons of muddy red water down toward the sea. Then all day long the shouts of the Indians—"Storm, go away, I am afraid of you; so stop!"—go up among the camps, rising faintly above the roar of the river, the rush of the rain, and the ceaseless rumble of the thunder.

Water is everywhere in Santa Catarina, and it literally grows on trees, or at least in bamboo, the hollow stems of which are filled with it. You cannot walk far without coming across at least a brook, and the Indians use the streams as short cuts, sometimes walking in the water for half a mile. In nine days a pair of rubber-soled tennis shoes rotted off my feet; by the end of my five-weeks' hunting trip the seams of my waterproof leather boots had rotted. Yet in this land where a hundred thousand terraces bear witness to ages of slow erosion and the winding streams interlace like silver bands, the Kaingáng are without boats or rafts. They have every other technique for crossing a stream that ingenuity and resourcefulness might suggest: they knock down a tree on one side of a stream so that it will fall on the other and form a bridge, and they also build crude bridges. Men who have supernatural power obtained from some water animal may even brave a turbulent stream to carry a line across so that other people may pull themselves across on it. But before they came to Duque de Caxias the Kaingáng knew nothing of navigation, and the one instance in folklore of an attempt at it ended in a fiasco. Of course the Kaingáng were land nomads. It would have been too much work to build a canoe or even a raft just to cross a stream and it was much easier for them to wait until the river went down; for the Kaingáng never felt a pressing need to be anywhere at any particular time. They might just as well have been on one side of the river as on the other.

To know how to walk in the bed of a stream, stepping unerringly from stone to slippery stone, is really a blessing, for a smarting body appreciates the respite from thorns, and the coldness of the water is soothing to one's battered and aching shins. The forest is no place for a pleasant stroll. The gait of the forest rover is unmistakable, for he never just steps; he *places his feet*. Where a thorn may prick, a vine slash, a fallen log batter; where the earth may crumble underfoot or a snake strike from the concealment of a pile of leaves or a low bush overhanging the trail, every move must be a maneuver. When an Indian is scratched or bruised, he stops and removes the cause so that those who follow will not suffer as he did. He gropes for the thorn until he finds it and then carries it far away to dispose

2: Henry E-5 (1932-1934) 1941
SM3 Caingang SM3
Aweikoma

of it, or he carefully chops out the root or log until the path is clear; he never leaves a rough edge.

The forest has certain little peculiarities whose marks the Indians recognize when they see one of their number come back from the hunt with a bloody eye or a mass of little cuts on his legs. There is a kind of bamboo that the Indians call *kpẽkfã* which hangs like a vine from trees and whose mark on the human body is so specific that the Indians can always tell when one of them has fallen foul of it. *Kpẽkfã* has a surface like sandpaper and a long thorn that curves slightly upward like a tiny scimitar. If you escape the thorn the surface may slap across your face and leave a stinging welt. There is also a tall strong grass that grows in the open places the Indians love so well and that cuts like a knife. No one dares just walk through it; the feet must swing out like scythes to beat it down.

The Indians are acutely aware of their mountain forests as something with which they have to struggle and which is full of pain for them. The forest is a mass of vines and thorns that cut and trip; it is alive with insects that suck and torment; and they make no bones about saying so. They divide the forest into "clean places," those in which there are no vines, thorns, or bamboo,—they also call them "pretty places"—and "dirty places," where the tangle is so thick that it obscures the light of day.

In the winter these mountain forests are cold and nights are gray with the mist that rises from the watercourses. The temperature often drops below freezing at night, and not even the thickest clothing will keep out the cold and damp. Yet for generations the only clothing the Indians had was a knee-length netlike robe of plant fiber, worn about the waist by the women, and a closely woven shirt of the same material, reaching to the hips, worn by the men in the winter. When they began to raid the Brazilians they stole vests and blankets and it was common to see an Indian naked except for a little belt around his waist to tie up his penis—and a vest. The vest kept the torso warm while it allowed freedom of motion to the arms. The Kaingáng never do anything more with an animal skin than make soup of it, and before they had blankets and vests they simply spread a few fern fronds on the ground at night and lay down on them to sleep, pulling a net-like robe over themselves if they were so fortunate as to possess one.

On winter nights they are miserable and often get up to warm themselves by the fire. One morning in May as I warmed my aching joints by the fire and watched my breath spiral upward, Chukembégn said to me: "Last night I slept all over the place. It was so cold nobody slept." Sometimes they fall asleep sitting by the fire, their arms on their drawn-up knees, their heads sunk forward. The scarcity of blankets brings the young men together in the sleeping parties they love, when a half dozen of them,

2: Henry E-5 (1932-1934) 1941
SM3 Caingang SM3
Aweikoma

wrapped in each other's arms, lie under a couple of blankets. Children sleep almost anywhere that they can crawl under a blanket, and any solitary sleeper welcomes warm flesh that will help to shelter him against the cold. If children were not welcome sleeping companions it would go hard with them in families where scarcity of blankets would leave them absolutely unprotected.

The Kaingáng are hungry in winter and early spring. Then the tracks of animals are hard to interpret and the tapir can run far and fast, for it is no longer burdened with its young and the forest is cool. To the Kaingáng the tapir is not only the most important food, it is the very symbol of food. When they have no tapir meat there is very little meat of any kind, for the tapir is most plentiful when the wild fruits and nuts are ripe, and when these are gone the monkeys and birds, the rodents and pigs, the deer and the tapir that have fed on them for months, grow scarce or vanish altogether. Many primitive people who are faced with this seasonal scarcity have developed some technique of preservation, but not so the Kaingáng. They preserve only pine nuts and have nothing to support them in these times of hunger.

Summer, with its warmth, its dryness, and its plenty, brings comfort at last to these people who sew no skins and make no warm clothes against the winter, who have no knowledge of boats or rafts to carry them across the rivers that lie everywhere around them, and who, in a hungry land, preserve no food and make no traps. If necessity were the mother of invention the Kaingáng would have all these things, which would make their life easier. If people systematically adapted themselves to their environment the Kaingáng would not only be dogged and skillful hunters, but they would have the traps and the fishing techniques which they completely lack. The men would not only be untiring, uncomplaining providers, but they would have discovered how to preserve the food they obtain with so much effort, so that in the lean days of winter they would not grow weak and retch and vomit with hunger.

The Kaingáng are powerful and of tough physique.[2] The arms and legs of the full-grown men are thick and muscular, and the women, although shorter and less conspicuously muscular, are strong enough to carry heavy loads. Their hair is straight and black, their dark-brown eyes wide and level, their noses high-bridged and coarse, their lips thick. Their skin color ranges from a deep brown to a golden tan. Sometimes a sick person who has lain a long time by the fire, away from the sun, may be practically white. The men, who are about as tall as the average white European, are graceful in spite of their massiveness. It is a pleasure to see them walk—the tangled forest has never let them learn to run—with their high springing

[2] They have very bad teeth.